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Place-Based Inquiry's Potential for Encouraging Public Participation: Stories From the Common Ground Land in Kenora, Ontario

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ABSTRACT

Natural resource management increasingly strives for meaningful public participation as a means to address the complexity, uncertainty, and conflict inherent in planning and decision making. When there are multiple stakeholders, place-based inquiry shows considerable promise as a vehicle for such participation. The Common Ground Land (CGL), important heritage lands in Kenora, Ontario, provides an opportunity to consider the relationship between place-based inquiry and participation. The CGL is the subject of an emerging system of governance initiated by a multistakeholder partnership. Semistructured interviews and modified focus groups were used to promote place-based conversations regarding the CGL. Our inquiry reveals grounded themes related to connections, perspectives, and visions, including subthemes such as "respect," "spiritual activities," "community," and "fear of disconnection." Our results illustrate that place-based inquiry has potential to work as a vehicle for meaningful participation, and in this case created a supportive avenue for participation in future CGL planning and decision making.

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The last 30 years have witnessed significant changes in natural resource management, including growing recognition of complexity, uncertainty, and conflict in planning and decision making (e.g., Rudestam 2014). Another change is the broad acceptance of governance approaches that encourage meaningful public participation from a wide range of stakeholders (e.g., adaptive co-management, multistakeholder advisory bodies, social learning initiatives) (Reed 2008; Armitage et al. 2009; Leys and Vanclay 2011). Such approaches help address complexity, uncertainty, and conflict in practical ways, and also serve foundational precepts of deliberative democracy, collaborative governance, and learning. However, a common challenge faced by most participatory processes is how to ensure legitimate and meaningful public engagement.

Natural resource management has recently begun to focus on place and place-based management as a way to enable participatory governance through active public involvement (e.g., Williams and Stewart 1998; Cheng, Kruger, and Daniels 2003; Davenport and Anderson 2005; Sampson and Goodrich 2009). Much place research focuses on ascertaining

varying degrees of people's attachment to place in order to decide what aspects decision makers might use to improve well-being in an area: physically, mentally, socially, and environmentally (Sack 1997; Hay 1998; Cox and Holmes 2000; Stedman 2003; Beckley et al. 2007). This research generally focuses on collecting people's values about places and gathering shared meanings, but critics of this use of place research argue that places are dynamic and contested, especially in the case where there are multiple and divergent voices. As such, Yung, Friemund, and Belsky (2003) caution, "Researchers and decision-makers need to be aware of and upfront about theoretical difference and the assumptions that influence their research approach" (857). Thus, place-based inquiry, for the purposes of this article, is predicated upon an understanding of place as a location embedded with diverse meaning that is in flux due to the varying perspectives associated with it (Massey 2005). Engaging people's connection to place and allowing them to shape discourses and narratives about a place can inform planning and governance processes and be a way of fostering meaningful participation at the normative planning stage (Casey 2001; McIntyre 2003; Yung et al. 2003; Tuan 2004; Williams and Patterson 2007; Lukas and Ardoin 2014; Urquhart and Acott 2014).

Along this line, planning literature recognizes that transactive planning is particularly important in contexts of fractured societies, creating the need for meaningful participation to include purposeful activities through which participants can hear the diverse values central to a planning space (Friedmann 1987; Healey 1997, 2004; Davidson-Hunt and O'Flaherty 2007). While Indigenous planning in Canada has often taken a territorial approach as First Nations can negotiate planning authority on the basis of Treaty Rights with state governments, non-Treaty urban lands present clear contexts of fractured societies in which a space may have diverse place constructions. It is in such contexts of multivocality that place-based inquiry may be particularly useful in creating the conditions for meaningful participation (Yung et al. 2003). This does not guarantee that all interests will be reflected in a final plan but could intentionally create an early opportunity during the normative planning phase for participation that is different from other approaches, such as interest-based negotiation, potentially enabling decision making that is not based solely on personal interests.

We explored these propositions in an investigation of an ongoing collaborative initiative in northwestern Ontario. The Rat Portage Common Ground Conservation Organization (RPCGCO) is an initiative of the city of Kenora, three Anishinaabe First Nations (Wauzhusk Onigum, Obashkaandagaang, and Ochiichagwe'baigo'ining), and the Grand Council of Treaty 3. The RPCGCO was established to manage a parcel of heritage lands within the present-day boundaries of the city of Kenora. The lands, referred to in this article as the Common Ground Land, consist of Tunnel Island (TI), Old Fort Island, and Bigsby's Rat Portage (Figure 1). We use the phrase Common Ground Land (CGL) because the land and its history were important features in a local movement toward reconciliation and open dialogue started in 2000 and continuing called Common Ground, which is attempting to foster "constructive working relationships between First Nation and non-First Nation governments on a variety of mutual concerns" (Dovetail Resources 2006, 2). As a part of this process the Common Ground Research Forum (CGRF) was established by way of a Community University Research Alliance grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Sinclair 2009). The Executive of the CGRF includes decision makers from the signatories of the RPCGCO, community members, and university researchers.

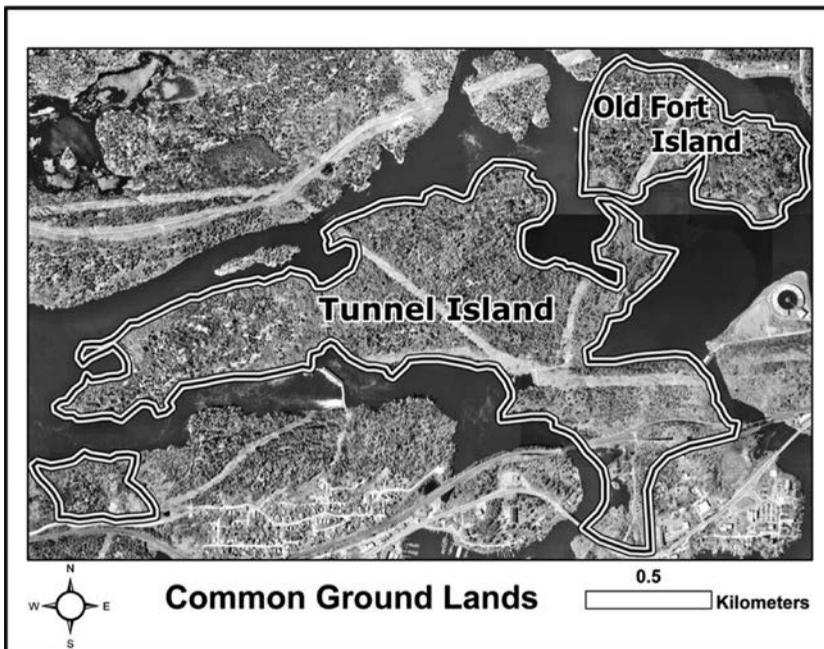


Figure 1. Map of the Common Ground Land within Kenora, Ontario 2010 (Wheeler Wiens 2011, 42). Permission for the use of this map granted by Sheldon Ratuski.

The purpose of this study was to explore the degree to which place-based inquiry can foster meaningful public participation in the early, or normative, stage¹ (Smith 1982) of planning. Specifically, this research examined local individuals' connections to the CGL and considered how these connections could contribute to future planning by the RPCGCO for the CGL. Place-based inquiry was utilized to allow a diversity of participants to be involved in normative discussions before formal land use planning began. The objective was to document a diversity of place constructions and then bring people together through a safe avenue to share these connections and visions and what they meant to participants in thinking about the future of the CGL. As the RPCGCO has not yet established a formal planning process for the CGL, we were not able to consider whether this research has led to more meaningful participation in such a process.

Context

There is a significant body of literature on the importance and dynamics of public participation in natural resource management (e.g., Praxis 1988; Stewart and Sinclair 2007; Muro and Jeffrey 2008; Berkes 2009), and meaningful participation in decision making has been a heated topic since the 1960s (Diduck, Reed, and George 2014). It has also been suggested that participation is a key component in the shift toward sustainability (Goodland and Daly

¹Normative refers to the early planning period where participants negotiate broader societal ideals surrounding the nature of development and what might be best for a community or region, rather than focusing on project-specific operational elements.

1995), and as such local engagement is now often paramount in collaborative decision-making models, especially in the case of cross-cultural partnerships (Gibson 2005). Meaningful participation has been defined as “participatory processes that incorporate all of the essential components of participation, from information sharing to education, including the active and critical exchange of ideas among proponents, regulators and participants” (Sinclair and Diduck 2016, 59). For participation to be meaningful, its timing in the decision process is critical. Smith (1982) establishes normative (what should be done), strategic (what can be done), and operational (what will be done) decision-making stages. While participation is essential to all of these stages, it is critically important in the normative stage when decisions about the potential actions that could be taken are formulated. This normative stage is where we can start to understand meanings and narratives associated with place and, in fractured societies, recognize the plurality of place narratives. Recognizing this can open up perspectives and allow difference to be recognized, shared, and negotiated during further planning process (Hodge and Robinson 2001; Davidson-Hunt and O’Flaherty 2007).

However, there are numerous challenges to facilitating meaningful public participation, especially at these early stages. For example, Sinclair and Diduck (2016) critique the procedural elements through which participation is fostered, suggesting that one-time efforts to bring together diverse publics are often unsatisfactory and come too late in the decision cycle. They argue that meaningful participation necessitates early, ongoing, and deliberative participation, at normative and strategic levels of planning, but that this is often missing from many project processes (Smith 1982; Stewart and Sinclair 2007). Another critique is the lack of awareness and inclusion of First Nations in many planning exercises (Smith 1999; Walker, Jojola, and Natcher 2013). Most of the literature on participation does not consider the role that place-based inquiry can play, nor does it provide techniques or processes by which people can gain understanding of diverse place connections and perspectives.

Place-based inquiry is viewed in a growing literature as having potential to enable meaningful public participation because it can help develop mutual understandings of the values people embed in locations (Stedman 2003; Hernandez et al. 2007; Urquhart and Acott 2014). That is, place-based inquiry creates situations for diverse actors to share their interpretations of a place, which can foster rich, complex, and nuanced understandings (Yung et al. 2003; Rudestam 2014). As such, the literature establishes the need for a broader and more encompassing understanding of place that does not simply stop at defining people’s attachment (as much of the literature has done) but views people as ongoing place makers, as active agents in dynamic relationships between people and place (Massey 2005). This recognizes that place goes beyond elements of attachment and focuses on the impact of people on place(s), as well as the impact of place(s) on people (Cruikshank 2005; Massey 2005).

With respect to meaningful public participation, we contend that such a place-based approach can enhance planning at the normative stage by engaging people’s connection to place and creating, through the research relationship, respectful space for a visioning dialogue to occur on individual and group levels. This key element of normative planning (allowing discussion around what should happen) occurs when people share stories about connections and visions for places, opening people up to alternative perspectives and connecting them in new ways.

Case Study

Common Ground: The Movement and the CGL Initiative

Common Ground is a local movement trying to bring together the diverse groups who, while having shared the CGL for more than 300 years, have their own histories and understanding of these lands as place(s). Kenora, Ontario, is home to more than 15,000 permanent residents and consists of Euro-Canadian settler groups, recent newcomers from various countries, Métis, and First Nations (FN) peoples (both in the surrounding FN communities and in an increasing urban Aboriginal population within the municipality) (Robson et al. 2013; Zurba and Friesen 2014). The relationship between Euro-Canadian settlers and Aboriginal peoples of northwestern Ontario has been characterized by an increasing Euro-settler presence, Aboriginal exclusion from economic and social development opportunities, and numerous tensions and conflicts (Davidson-Hunt and O’Flaherty 2007; Robson et al. 2013). As elsewhere in Canada, Aboriginal people have worked to overcome this history through various means, and many Kenora residents, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, embarked on a journey of reconciliation around the turn of the century.

The Common Ground movement (*Wassay Gaa Bo* in Anishinaagemodaa language) was formalized in 2001 by regional leaders from Kenora and neighboring First Nations as both a vision and a philosophy of sharing, as well as a political and community response to cross-cultural tensions (Wheeler Wiens 2011; Zurba and Friesen 2014). Out of a symbolic handshake between the Grand Chief of Treaty 3 and the mayor of Kenora came the beginnings of a collaborative relationship, which eventually led to the creation in 2008 of a joint partnership to manage the CGL (Robson et al. 2013). The Rat Portage Common Ground Conservation Organization (RPCGCO) was established and involves five partners: the city of Kenora, three neighboring First Nations—Wauzhusk Onigum, Obashkaandagaang, and Ochiichagwe’baigo’ining—and the Grand Council of Treaty #3. The RPCGCO’s mandate has been described as a new and exciting approach in Canada because the CGL offers “a recreational space, shared land, a political landscape in the heart of a community—where ideals of cross-cultural relations, collaboration, and social cohesion ... are set to be tried and tested” (Robson et al. 2013, 6). The CGRF was formed to help support the efforts of the RPCGCO in relation to cross-cultural governance, learning, and land management.

Common Ground: The Land

The CGL is located within the city of Kenora, Ontario, but carries a rich cultural history of settlement dating back to 6000 B.C.E. (Robson et al. 2013). The land is significant partly due to its location at the headwaters of the Winnipeg River on the Lake of the Woods, a large international body of water (Forest Capital Report 1999). In the last half of the century, TI, the more accessible part of the CGL, began to be used regularly by Kenora residents for recreation. In recent years more people have begun to use the land, especially TI, for recreational activities and there are well-used walking and biking trails skirting and crossing the northern part of the island (Robson et al. 2013). The island has also been the site for a bi-annual feast in the spring and fall, where one of the RPCGCO’s First Nation partners welcomes visitors and conducts spiritual ceremonies.

At the time of this research, the RPCGCO was in its formative stages, still establishing its mandate and internal governance system, and had not yet begun formal planning for the CGL. Ownership of the CGL was, in fact, held in trust by one of the RPCGCO partners for the organization pending resolution of the governance issues. Overall, the organization was proceeding cautiously, which was partly due to the unique nature of the partnership as well as several political and legal issues that were challenging to resolve. For example, a vexing issue was liability, namely, which entity would and should be responsible for what happens on the land. An outcome of this cautious approach has been uncertainty among the general public regarding who has authority to make decisions regarding the land and what decisions may have already been taken (Robson et al. 2013).

Methods

This study employed three methods: document review, semistructured interviews, and modified focus groups. We used three aspects of place connections identified in the literature, namely, personal worldview, physical experience, and sociocultural discourse, to help design our interview guide. In conducting the interviews we followed the approaches suggested by Berg (2004) and Chase (2008). The study was approved by the Joint Ethics Review Board of the University of Manitoba and was supported locally by the partners of the RPCGCO. The interview questions asked about past usage and memories of the CGL, current usage, and future visions for personal and shared use of the land. Twenty-seven people participated in the empirical portion of the study. The participants were identified using a snowball method with one main limiting factor: The participant had to have spent time on the CGL. We attempted to include a diversity of participants, with different backgrounds, ages, genders, and histories of use of the island. Many of the participants had been involved with the RPCGCO and the CGRF since their inception.² As a part of the study, we undertook knowledge mobilization and dissemination activities: publication of a plain-language summary of the results, and three presentations in Kenora at community forums.

We drew on the concept of relationality (Wilson 2008) within an Indigenous Research Paradigm³ by first interviewing participants and then inviting the same individuals to attend modified focus groups. The modified focus groups embodied important talking-circle and focus-group etiquettes by having participants sit in a circle and take turns speaking about the same topics introduced by the researcher in the individual interviews (connection to the CGL, perspective, and visions). Three groups took place with 13 of the 27 participants able to attend. In addition to following up on the interview topics, a purpose of the focus groups was to create an arena for relationships to be built toward a shared vision (Healey 1997). To personalize and ground the group meetings, we used tools adapted from sharing-circle methodology used by Rothe, Ozegovic, and Carroll (2009). These procedures included the use of a “talking stone,” a pouch of tobacco (to be gifted to the land after the meeting in accordance with local First Nations’ customs), and a candle, as well as always initiating discussion in the same direction around the circle. The modified focus groups were successful

²The participants had the following general breakdown. Gender: 11 female and 16 male. Age (approximate): 8 people between 20 and 40 years, 15 people between 40 and 60 years, and 4 people retired/elder. Ethnicity: 7 First Nation, 3 Métis, and 17 Euro-Canadian. This breakdown partially reflects the sociocultural makeup of the municipality of Kenora and thus the people who are in closest proximity to Tunnel Island (the main piece of the CGL).

³Other concepts we relied upon from the literature were community/kinship and the place-based nature of research (Walker et al. 2013).

in being a safe and inviting situation for people to share different place constructions and ideas about the CGL. An important aspect of this can be attributed to following talking-circle guidelines, as the conversations were intentionally set up to encourage respectful listening.

The individual and group interviews were recorded and transcribed, and analysis was conducted using QSR International's NVivo 10 software. This was used to organize the data, discern and code important themes and interconnections, and display the themes and interconnections, which both arose from the data and were grounded in the literature. Results were organized into three primary and several secondary themes: (1) connections (childhood, CGCL, activities, connections disconnections), (2) perspectives (physical geography, northern lifestyle, community, economy, respect, change), and (3) visions (economic, respect, community, fear of disconnection).

Connections, Broader Context of the CGL, and Visions

The results provide a brief snapshot into the breadth and depth of data gathered. We focus on the three primary themes described earlier particularly as they relate to the potential use of place-based inquiry to encourage meaningful public participation in RPCGCO initiatives. In the text, the themes are often represented by direct quotations from the interviews or focus groups. To protect anonymity, we assigned code names to the participants.

Understanding Place Through Connections

Connection activities included any usage and experience of the CGL both past and present. Because TI has relatively easy walking paths and is close to the center of Kenora, many participants used the area as a gathering place to socialize and for recreation with family or friends. Participants gathered informally to walk, run, mountain bike, or view wildlife. There were also residential and livelihood activities that were often linked for participants who had lived on the northern part of the island as children. "These places were traditional sites, handed down from generations to us to stay and do our business. Either trading with the town of Kenora, or back in the olden days, with other tribes coming from other areas" (Evan). Fishing and gathering berries or medicine were common during this time. Residential activities also encompassed the actions of people who currently live on the southern part of the island in houses and instances of persons living in seasonal camps near the center of the island.

Participants also recalled memories of their experiences playing and living on the island as key times of connection to the place. Often these connections were expressed as fond remembrances of carefree times as youth: "that was our swampland, that's where we were the pirates" (Owen). However, some memories were about difficult times, as some people had been marginalized and told they could no longer live on the northern part of the island. "They told us to leave, halfway up from here where the power lines came and they told us elders to leave. So we started paddling, my mom and my auntie and the rest of the kids were small" (Laura).

One of the main reasons for gathering was a spiritual activity, namely, the First Nations-led feasts. These feasts occur twice a year and include a drum ceremony with food and tobacco offerings. A teacher brought her preteen students from the local school to a fall feast and reported, "Those kids loved it. The whole gathering was just great for them. They felt connected, so it was good" (Shane). Other spiritual activities on TI were also highlighted in the interviews and focus groups, and they included offerings of tobacco or food throughout the year, often as part of personal practices. "That is probably the only place that I can think

of where I consistently remember to bring tobacco and it's only because that's the custom I was taught when I just started going there" (Elaine). Additionally, people related stories of experiencing a spiritual presence on the land. One participant described an event in which she received a vision regarding a particular part of the island. "I saw that turtle, and that turtle gave me that vision, spoke to me in a spiritual way, and [I had an] understanding that we need to clean this beach up" (Melvin).

Understanding the Broader Context of Place

Relating the CGL to broader context happened spontaneously, such that every participant mentioned community in some way, for example, communal health or well-being, and the creation of inclusive community processes. "That place doesn't shut anybody down. I think people ... just people, all walks of life go there and check it out" (Evan). Tunnel Island was spoken about as a community gathering place and a place for fostering spiritual connections. "I feel like this about all of the land. To me it's very spiritual ... that we are a part of the land, we are a part of the water. So that's the way I see it when I look at it ... it's a living, living thing" (Pauline). There was also reflection on TI being a part of a powerful common worldview. "It's such a powerful place, and it's powerful to different people in different ways ... and it's still there providing sustenance to the people of the community" (Elaine).

Other important perspectives pertained to issues of change, which reveal the complex environmental, cultural, and historical context of TI. For example, one participant indicated, "I still remember them filling in the swamp with bark from the mill" (Owen) and "If you look at a picture of Husky the Musky [beside TI] say before 1975 ... the lake was full of wood. It was great big booms and full of pulpwood (around the west side of TI)" (Aaron). Participants also commented on the rapid generational change in values regarding the area and the shift in Kenora from a resource extraction economy to one centered on tourism. Participants' perspectives on the changes occurring in the area often came through stories about TI, whether they were excited, threatened, or sorrowful about what has transpired or will transpire. One story recalled what had been:

There are places that are sort of coiffed in sadness. ... Like there's a former campsite on the east end of the island [OFI] where a family from one of the First Nations sought refuge in the 1960s and I know that during the big sweeps from the Child and Family services, agents would come and steal children away. And it makes me really sad. (Elaine)

Finally, there have been many recent changes to the island that were directly related to the Common Ground movement. These changes have had a significant effect on the number of people coming to and using TI, and have even affected the way people name the place. One person said, "You know what, I've known it as Tunnel Island all along, until Common Ground came and then I started calling it Common Ground" (Shane). These results demonstrate the layered connections people are able to acknowledge when sharing stories about a place such as the CGL.

Place Informing Vision(s)

We asked the participants, first individually and then in the focus groups, to share their vision(s) regarding the future of the area. These data were organized into four grounded

secondary themes: economic, respect, community/inclusion, and fear of disconnection. Economic visions included considerations of the changes in the regional economy toward tourism and the role TI could have in generating interest in the area. “I wouldn’t mind if they made the trails more developed ... I think it would be useful for our tourist economy” (Rodrick).

The theme of respect included ideas about the way events or actions should occur in the future, especially regarding use of the CGL. “Anybody who does use it has to respect it and leave no footprints. The bottom line is respect” (Laura). This subtheme also included commentary on respectful relationships, bringing out cultural ideas regarding traditions of inclusivity:

I would have to look to the elders to ask them what they would see there [on TI]. I believe they would have the most wisdom and the most knowledge to give to all of us. Not only my people but the non-native people as well. (Pauline)

The community/inclusion vision, focused mostly on TI, represented a hope for togetherness and wholeness.

I look at it as a vision, there’s an opportunity for people to get to know each other ... openness, sharing of knowledge, understanding. A place where we can be in tune with nature because to me, it is Tunnel Island, but to me it’s about Turtle Island, about the people. (Melvin)

Some participants also expressed a fear of disconnection, distress that reflected some of the historical alienation from the land that had occurred, but also reflective of the weight of the hope for future shared interconnections with the land and among people. There was also apprehension over what was happening with governance of the CGL, such as who was making decisions and the possibility that changes to the lands might suddenly occur without notice. These concerns were often expressed in terms of lack of clear communication from the RPCGCO and other authorities.

I wish there was more communication ... Because people are scared. I will hear a rumor that ... they are going to build condos out there or something. A lot of people love the place but they don’t want to see a lot of changes made [and] there’s not a lot of communication. (Ivan)

Overall, fear of disconnection reflected one of the key challenges in sharing place within diverse communities. As one participant reflected on a CGL workshop held a few years after the initial handshake in 2000 by the mayor of Kenora and the Grand Chief of Treaty #3:

There was a discussion about people’s vision for that place ... One of the things we did was go around and everyone expressed what they felt was their connection to that land. And what came out of that was people’s different experiences of that place ... I think that the danger of interpreting it for the public is, whose story do you tell? Because everyone that comes there probably experiences it in a different way and to impose then, an interpretation of that place—one interpretation of that place—diminishes, I think, the stories of other people. (Ophelia)

This participant’s views also help to establish the way that a place-based inquiry process allows recognition of the plurality of perspectives of place. This participant’s ideas were shared, individually but also in one of the modified focus groups, allowing participants to reflect the implications of multiple interpretations of place.

The research participants reflected a range of experiences with the CGL; several were integrally connected to the RPCGCO, and others were less involved, while others had just learned about it and were eager to become involved. This latter group often had ideas for

increasing economic potential: “I still think that place has tremendous potential. And the city is sitting on a gold mine there as far as what it had to offer in terms of usage and tourism” (Aaron). The second group included a person who talked about how she had stopped attending meetings related to the CGL because she felt her voice was silenced. It was clear that excitement and concern expressed in our discussions with the participants about visions for the future were based on actual experiences of TI.

Place-Based Inquiry as a Vehicle for Meaningful Participation

The findings show how place-based inquiry can be used to lead and ground conversations that can increase potential for achieving meaningful participation in planning and management. The results respond to the gap in the literature regarding use of people’s connection to place to allow for broader context discussions that reveal both shared and contested visions. The following discussion highlights some of the potential of place-based inquiry to encourage more meaningful participation.

Identifying Commonalities and Differences

The many layers of connections, perspectives, and visions were overlapping and complex, creating an overall picture that sharing vision(s) is inclusive of difference, allowing stories of connection and disconnection, and of hope and fear. Sharing feelings, viewpoints, and values to build mutual understanding and empathy is an important aspect of resolving normative value conflicts (Dorcey, Doney, and Ruggenberg 1994; Mitchell 2002). These sorts of conflicts can arise when selecting among diverse social goals or reconciling seemingly incompatible social benefits and costs, such as economic growth from resource development and losses to aesthetic values derived from undeveloped natural settings. Methods that are conducive to future visioning and that allow respectful room for difference, such as place-based inquiry, are therefore invaluable instruments in the normative planning toolbox (e.g., Kallis et al. 2009; Bohunovsky, Jäger, and Omann 2011). Regarding our version of place-based inquiry, one person said, “You are actually aiding the coming together and sharing, you are actually promoting that. Which is great” (Melvin).

Revealing Connection and Disconnections

The results also demonstrated the potential of place-based inquiry to reveal not only people’s connections, but also their disconnections and fear of future disconnection. People felt safe to share their experiences and concerns individually, in the interviews, but also during the modified focus groups allowing local people to discuss among themselves some of their worries. One theme noted in the results was that many participants felt they were not a part of RPCGCO discussions. This result is consistent with the literature reporting that place-based questions are often asked after significant changes have occurred in the local environment (Billig 2005; Carter, Dyer, and Sharma 2007), although in this case the RPCGCO had not yet initiated any governance activities, such as land use planning. Our findings may thus actually help the RPCGCO establish an inclusive planning process so that people do not end up feeling disconnected in the event the organization begins planning for the CGL.

Creating a Safe and Welcoming Avenue for Participation

Similarly, the results, which include personal perspectives and narratives not often acknowledged in resource management, suggest that place-based conversations can begin to shift subjectivities toward recognition of and dialogue about different perspectives (Yung et al. 2003; Davenport and Anderson 2005; Lukas and Ardoin 2014). Furthermore, it was the relationship between participants and the researchers that opened the door for these conversations, during interviews and then the modified focus groups. This relationship created a tool by which people could participate respectfully, being able to share their own ideas but also listen to others. This observation supports the assertion in the literature that place-based participation fosters engagement and promotes awareness of personal and communal connections, thereby improving the quality of participation (Mcintyre 2003; Beckley et al. 2007).

Another important goal of place-based inquiry “is to foster more equitable, democratic participation in natural resource politics by including a broader range of voices and values centering around places rather than policy position” (Cheng et al. 2003, 89). Our results revealed the ability for a place focus to illuminate a broad range of personal and social contexts, concerns, and ideas. Having a place focus allowed participants to talk about their relationships with the land, as well as to witness and hear other people’s relationships, instead of more narrowly focusing on instrumental policy goals. Thus, the use of place-based inquiry to engage people in conversations is demonstrated in the literature and in our findings as being an effective way to gather rich narratives about place communities (Yung et al. 2003; Urquhart and Acott 2014). Participants shared difficult emotions, feelings of disconnection, and concerns, which indicates that they felt safe and respected. This is consistent with lessons drawn from the literature. The place conversations we held in Kenora, both semistructured interviews and then modified focus-group meetings, allowed community members to share their stories and express their diverse values beginning to create an inclusive environment for future planning phases.

Place and Well-Being

One of the clear results from this work reflected a contention in place-based research that “community is tied to place” (Hay 1998). “Place, then, can be seen as a center of human meaning, intentions and values... a focus of human emotion, sentiment, attachment and experience” (Windsor and McVey 2005, 148–49). Several participants mentioned meaningful family gatherings that occurred on the CGL, bringing people together, and others mentioned experiences where people suffering from mental illness were soothed. In fact, the results indicated that many participants saw the CGL as a place of connection: connection to other people, connection to the natural world, and connection to self. This observation is consistent with the literature on well-being of communities, and in particular Indigenous communities, which reveals that connection to place is an essential aspect of well-being (Hay 1998; De la Cadena 2010). Revealing such connections to place are important in the normative planning stage to help build authentic understanding about the relationships to the land already present.

It is also not surprising that we found loss of positive connections to place to be detrimental to individual and communal well-being (Escobar 2001; Billig 2005;

Cruikshank 2005; Carter et al. 2007). The disconnection that some participants experienced adversely affected trust relations in the community. Many people were skeptical about efforts to include the public in governance when years ago people had been actively excluded from the land. Many participants also expressed strong feelings of sadness and frustration over lack of communication, creating fear of exclusion from decisions and discussions about a place to which they have important connections. These concerns pose formidable challenges to participatory governance, particularly within multicultural settings, such as the Kenora area, where cultural differences in themselves can create hurdles to communication and collaboration. The concerns also create a strong imperative for finding ways, such as this type of place-based research, to allow a diversity of voices to be heard by creating inclusive activities during planning process (Hodge and Robinson 2001).

Conclusion

The conversations encouraged through our place-based inquiry provided new opportunities for participants to engage in discussions about the CGL. Our results reveal that the participants associated strongly to this place and spoke eloquently about the CGL, reporting numerous and varied connections, broad contexts and perspectives, and visions relating to the CGL and its future use. In conclusion, we feel that the results show that place-based inquiry has good potential as a method to support normative stage planning, and that it is particularly useful in creating the conditions for documenting a diversity of place constructions, and allowing people to find out about others' connection to place.

Disengagement from CGL governance and the associated feelings of disconnection from place and community reported by our participants also highlight potential participation opportunities and areas of concern for the RPCGCO as it furthers its mandate. Our results reveal that including people will require the organization to adopt a governance structure reflective of the diverse values and concerns of local people and that allows for intentional engagement of people actively connected to the CGL. The literature indicates that such a structure can expose commonalities and differences in people's backgrounds and values attributed to place, and that these revelations can be important to planning. For example, a study by Yung et al. (2003) regarding forest management found that people's expectations for a place are related to what they think are important management considerations. The authors conclude that using place-based inquiry can be a way to begin resolving conflicts between people because voices of difference are heard. In our study, a similar outcome was revealed, particularly through the modified focus groups, where people of varied backgrounds and place connections were able to share in a safe environment their ideas and concerns about the CGL. The participants found the focus groups to be a good chance to connect with other people who cared about the CGL, even though their ideas and concerns were different.

The opportunities available to the RPCGCO for adopting an inclusive governance model are also reinforced in key results relating to the participants' visions for the CGL. An underlying theme was the clearly stated desire by all to remain connected to the CGL, both individually and as a community. This theme resonated through the visions regarding economic futures, respect for people and the land, and community inclusion in future decisions. The literature speculates that the more people are able to connect with places of importance in their lives, the more this can foster their engagement in conversations

about these places (e.g., McIntyre 2003; Lukas and Ardoin 2014). All of the participants mentioned community as being of importance to whatever happens to the CGL, exposing a strong desire to remain connected, but also to allow connection for others—the CGL was viewed as a place of gathering.

Lastly, the use of place-based inquiry in this case study resulted in people being engaged in a meaningful discussion about land, resource use and governance. Our research showed that this type of place-based inquiry (built on a broader and more encompassing understanding of place) holds potential to help facilitate meaningful participation in governance by creating a safe place for deliberation and illuminating both commonalities and differences. The research also yielded values-based information that will offer a foundation for normative planning processes should the RPCGCO decide to use any of the materials generated through this study as it proceeds. In the case of the CGL, people had not had the opportunity to voice concerns they had about possible governance initiatives and use related to the land, which increased their enthusiasm for the research, but also made them apprehensive about future CGL planning and decision making. Since the RPCGCO is still dealing with its own governance approach, it was impossible for us to gauge the impact of this study on the organization's future planning efforts, but it is clear they will need to plan for inclusive management of the CGL. A promising line of future research would be to work with the RPCGCO, once it is active, on a planning exercise involving the results of this study and new place-based inquiry to test empirically the potential and drawbacks of that methodology as a technique for normative participation. However, we still suggest that our research has shown that adopting a place-based approach as a framework for participation would enable the RPCGCO to continue to value the numerous, diverse and rich narratives of place pertaining to the CGL.

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